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Next Reformation: Why Evangelicals Must Embrace Postmodernity (Book Review)

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Book Reviews

The Drama of Scripture: Finding our Place in the Biblical Story, by Craig G. Bartholomew and Michael W. Goheen, Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2004, ISBN: 0-8010-2746-2, 252 pp. Reviewed by Dr. Keith C. Sewell, Chair of the History Department and Professor of History, Dordt College.

Reading Craig G. Bartholomew and Michael W. Goheen's *The Drama of Scripture: Finding our Place in the Biblical Story* is like entering a promised land of milk and honey. *The Drama of Scripture* is an extraordinarily good book. It is a book that can be reliably recommended to those wondering "what's the Bible all about?" and to those new to the faith, while seasoned veterans will derive encouragement and depth from page after page. The authors have drunk from the wells of the redemptive-historical tradition of biblical understanding. They stand in the line of S. G. De Graaf's, *Promise and Deliverance* (1977-81), but this is no mere update and rework. The text is keen and fresh.

In discussing "the biblical drama," the authors have drawn on the "five act structure" familiar to readers of N. T. Wright and have amplified this somewhat at Act 5, "Spreading the News of the King," and by adding Act 6, "The Return of the King" (Bartholomew and Goheen, 26-7, cf. 21). [For N. T. Wright's most recent formulation, see his *The Last Word* (2005), 121-7]. In this respect, Bartholomew and Goheen are on solid ground, in my judgment. For centuries, the notion that "Christians go to heaven" has re-enforced a "world-flight" mentality, whereas the Bible clearly teaches that at the renewal of all things, the dwelling place of the Creator Redeemer is with His people in a cosmic setting (211-13). Although not a work of heavy scholarship, the easy-to-read prose is nevertheless the fruit of extensive learning and mature reflection.

Some problems remain. In a society threatened with *jihad*, more surely needs to be said about the violence (even genocide) of the Hebrew entry into the land of promise (77-85). Our authors have not skirted this issue, but it cries out for a more stringent treatment. Of course, part of the answer is that we derive our difficulties from biblical teaching itself. The clear and thoroughly sound intention of the authors is to enable us to place ourselves in the wider biblical story. In line with this purpose, they take time out from the actual biblical narrative to draw cameo

pictures of contemporary Christian discipleship (202-5). I found these depictions to be both interesting and encouraging. Yet I also experienced the transition from Paul and Barnabas (187-96, 200-1) to the post-apostolic church (202) to be deeply disturbing. The problem is that once we enter into the post-apostolic life of God's people, we must confront the question of apostasy. We need to address the process whereby "the Way" became the tool of empire; and we need some insight into how the Christian religion came to take on certain of the more egregious practices of Islam, such as so-called "holy war," slavery, and genocide. Why has Christianity so often sided with repression – sometimes with churchmen fighting to retain their coercive powers until the very last moment? We are not permitted to excise problems because they are inconvenient. Of course, great men such as Wilberforce struggled mightily in the cause of abolition, but sheer honesty demands that we recognize how much Christianity was previously involved in extending such a dreadful evil. And then there is the question of Christian anti-Semitism in all its hideous forms. It is a legitimate question: "If this is the true faith, how is it capable of distortions that have resulted in such human suffering?"

Of course, Bartholomew and Goheen are not purporting to offer us a comprehensive church history, and it would be unfair to criticize them for failing to have done so. Yet they have written for first-year undergraduates specifically (11), many of whom barely possess sufficient knowledge to have such questions come to mind; a failure to recognize their strength will not impress. These caveats notwithstanding, this is a very fine book. It should be recommended to all undergraduates and to all those wanting to know what the Bible is all about. It is clear and positive, and should help to deliver some of those who are enslaved by millennial fantasies. The authors have placed us all in their debt. Their work deserves to remain in print for a long time and is strongly recommended.

The Next Reformation: Why Evangelicals Must Embrace Postmodernity, by Carl A. Raschke, Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2004, ISBN: 0-8010-2751-9, 335 pp. Reviewed by Dr. Keith C. Sewell, Chair of the History Department and Professor of History, Dordt College.

The idea of "reformation" is still with us – as powerful and as suggestive as ever. A while ago I discussed in these

pages (*Pro Rege*, September 2002) the standpoint adopted by the authors of *Whatever Happened to the Reformation?*

(2001). They would have us, in some sense, “go back” to “the reformation.” Now, in Carl Raschke’s *The Next Reformation: Why Evangelicals Must Embrace Postmodernity*, we have a very different book indeed.

Raschke’s thesis is stated in his subtitle: evangelicalism must embrace the “postmodern.” Raschke refers to the reformation, specifically Luther, but only in the course of arguing this thesis. Moreover, it soon becomes clear that for Raschke, much post-reformation Protestantism partakes of the “modernism” that must be forsaken. Raschke teaches in the Department of Religious Studies at the University of Denver, Colorado. His is a checkered past, as far as denominational affiliation is concerned. For some, its diverse range will perhaps bespeak the free-floating variegatedness that is one of the hallmarks of the postmodern condition (Raschke 7-8). And Raschke has drunk deeply from the ever-suggestive wells of postmodern and related thinkers. Baudrillard (92-3, 146-9), Caputo (112-14), Heidegger (77-82), Lévinas (118-20), Nietzsche (41-8), Mark Taylor (86-92), and especially Deleuze (60-8) and Derrida (48-60, 82-6) all figure prominently in this work. If Raschke’s argument ultimately fails to convince this reviewer, it is not for want of his valuable, close reading of these authors *or* for his critique of the leading features of modernism.

So what is Raschke’s problem with modernism? How are we to view evangelicalism’s habitual relationship to modernism, and why must it change? Why is Evangelicalism viewed as being ultimately consistent with “postmodernity”? And how does contemporary Calvinism fit into the picture? What is Raschke advocating, and why?

Raschke advances a fairly conventional “postmodern” critique of modernism, although this critique must definitely *not* be confused with older conservative evangelical critiques of theological liberals. Modernism is driven and controlled by the rationalism of the Enlightenment. Evangelical anti-liberalism should not fool us here because in their characteristic outlooks, both liberalism and fundamentalism have absorbed more of the assumptions of the Enlightenment, with its rational foundationalism, than most evangelicals appreciate (140f.). Where evangelicals offer critiques of postmodernism, aligning themselves with contemporary neo-conservatism, they tend to unintentionally mimic recent “modernist” liberalism, adopting a pro-objectivist posture (12).

Yet, at the same time, the pragmatic and opportunistic side of evangelicalism absorbs the *mores* of postmodernity, even while criticizing its sidelining of “objective truth” and “rationality” (15, cf. 92-5). Evangelicals see the latter as having to be preserved, for the sake of the gospel, even though postmodernism breaks with an exclusive commitment to scientific rationality that Raschke believes evangelicals should find acceptable (18). In his view, “the theme of subjective truth, properly understood, has been far more congenial to the gospel throughout the ages than any canon of propositional certitude” (19). He insists that evangelicalism should adopt a postmodern stance in order to sever its long-stand-

ing connection with Baconianism and a now discredited modernity (21). Its persistent appropriations of foundationalist standpoints have put Evangelicalism on a slippery slope towards spiritual compromise (22-4).

Raschke is deeply opposed to the rationalist hubris of modernist foundationalism. The God of the philosophers is *rational*, while the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob (shades of Pascal), “the awesome ... Deity of the Bible,” (136) is *relational* (71, 81). He insists, rightly, that literal truth is not always literalistic (124). One of the clearest marks of the impact of modernist foundationalism on evangelicalism is its avowal of notions of biblical inerrancy “shaped by the commonsense realism of Reid’s philosophy” as articulated by “the old Princeton Theologians” (122 f.). If evangelicals would but take up postmodernism, they would find themselves delivered from both liberalism and fundamentalism – opposite ends of a single continuum (33). Evangelicals should be attracted to post-structuralism not least because it put logical positivism in its place, something evangelicals once longed for (36).

There is much in this to be commended. Raschke is rightly stung by Nietzsche’s barb that Christianity is (or, at least, had become) but “Platonism for the masses” (45). He is at his best when calling for the de-hellenizing of our faith (131-4), and emphasizing that the Bible speaks in relational terms rather than through any metaphysics of substance (152-4). Of course, the flowering of neo-Calvinistic reformational philosophy in the wake of Abraham Kuyper’s vast endeavors was deeply critical of philosophical and cultural modernity. A rigorous critique was mounted against “the pretended autonomy of theoretical thought” (Dooyeweerd). So what does Raschke say of such things? His access is by way of Francis Schaeffer and Cornelius Van Til, “the father of the Reformed School of thought known as presuppositionalism” (100). He rightly discerns that Schaeffer’s use of world-view language was “not dependent at all on the tradition of commonsense realism” (100, cf. 107). Rather, world-view “presuppositionalism” was derived from Dutch neo-Calvinism, a “distinct alternative to commonsense realism and the Princeton School” (100). However, for Raschke, presuppositionalism is of the same stock as logical positivism, in that it “derives from the late-modern standpoint that we have no direct knowledge of the world, but that we start in our understanding with certain beliefs, or ‘presuppositions,’ which we do not question at all.” And so it is that the heirs of Kuyper are also seen as entangled in modernism (101). In Raschke’s view, Princeton style foundationalism and neo-Calvinistic presuppositionalism are only superficially incompatible: “Foundationalists since Descartes have maintained that the certainty of our conclusions proceeds from the indubitability of our premises. Presuppositionalists agree that it is the other way round” (103). It is hard to argue with Raschke’s judgment that Schaeffer failed for want of philosophical depth (107-8).

Raschke does not look to post-Kuyperian reformational philosophy in his critique of modernity, and the participa-

tion of evangelicalism therein. Rather, he draws inspiration from his personal appropriation of Martin Luther. Luther is Raschke's hero (70). Indeed, for a Reformed reader, Raschke's appropriation and utilization of Luther is highly instructive. His call for "the next reformation" is to be understood in terms of his reading and appropriation of Luther's critique of the Catholicism of his day. Luther is "postmodern" in his emphasis on faith, over and against (modernistic) rationality and culture (26-7). Only after the Reformation did Protestantism (and with it evangelicalism) slide back to rationality, not least by way of John Locke and Thomas Read (27-31, 76). For Raschke, therefore, evangelicalism, reflecting its Lutheran lineage, is *not* intrinsically modern. Neither is evangelicalism to be confused with fundamentalism, with which it has become entangled since the nineteenth-century (33). The true *Geist* of the reformation was that of "religious postmodernism" (110-1, cf. 127-9).

In all of this we may discern some serious problems. I will mention two briefly. Firstly, Raschke casts Luther as offering an anti-modern "reformation" critique in his day (37). There seems to be something anachronistic about this. Raschke's Luther is just too deeply adverse to the *via moderna* of his day (111, cf. 210), and he cites Alister McGrath and Heiko Oberman to this effect (220, endnotes 13 and 14). This is certainly consistent with Raschke's argument, but it is too much of an oversimplification of the carefully drawn lines of Oberman's discussions. Here the reader should consult Oberman's *Masters of the Reformation* (1981, 71-110), *The Dawn of the Reformation* (1986, 52-83), and *Luther: Man Between God and the Devil* (1992, 119-123). Raschke frames Oberman's representation of Luther to suit his own latter-day argument.

Secondly, for Raschke: "The Next Reformation will be about faith, and faith alone. Here we stand. We can do nothing else." (98). Mention of Luther repeatedly prompts expressions of fideism; with "faith" positioned over against "reason" (114-5). It is hard not to see in this a reflection of the old pietist habit of putting "heart" over against "head." Driven, it would appear, by the postmodern spirit, Raschke is willing to opt for forms of irrationalism in the name of faith – as in his championship of Charles G. Finney (159-160). Consequently, Raschke's postmodern appropriation of Luther leaves him highly ambivalent about a Christian world-view. He definitely prefers H. Richard Niebuhr's "Christ the transformer of culture" model over against the "Christ against culture" alternative, in which he discerns the resonance of [modernist, Baconian] pre-millennialism (165). However, to articulate what "Christ the transformer of culture" entails for our discipleship would seem to require the kind of world-view that his anti-modernism resists. Such problems point to inner inconsistencies deep in the structure of Raschke's thinking. For him, "theologies of glory"—be they reformed-scholastic, commonsense-realist, rational-foundationalist or presuppositionalist—all exhibit the hubris of presuming that the right formulation "is sufficient for understanding God." (110). True, all such intellec-

tual presumption needs to be repented of, but the Christian scholarly calling still remains, though in Raschke it is far from clear that this is so.

We receive little insight from Raschke's musings on the likely possible character of the church after the "next reformation." He is careful to say that no one knows what it will be like (211). Old style propositional theology has run its course (211-5). As it is, his preferences are remarkably in line with his present ventures: "Mars Hill" churches of the "ragamuffin ministry" style (163-5, 169). Following William Beckham, *The Second Reformation* (1995), Raschke anticipates post-denominational cell churches (155). Brian McLaren's "emerging church" (171 f) and Paul Wagner's "third Wave of the Holy Spirit" experience, emphasizing "new charismatics" (181-2), are all part of the *pastiche*. The picture is predominantly charismatic (192 f).

A major difficulty remains. Much of this work pivots on the validity of the modern/postmodern distinction. Raschke touches upon this point only lightly, dismissing "ultra-modern" as an alternative rather too quickly (36). "Postmodern" might be a term validly used in art history and architectural studies to designate the styles that superseded the art and architecture labeled "modern" in the 1950s and 1960s. This usage, however, does not establish beyond cultural and philosophical dispute the validity of the "modern"/"postmodern" contra-distinction (cf. 173) as used by Raschke and many others. The supposed complete disjunction of the two is not necessarily coherent. So what of the so-called "postmodern condition?" It is possible to argue that this is made up of (a) *hypermodernity*, exhibiting many of the features of modernity with ever-increasing intensity, including a continually increasing range of options and velocity of change, combined with (b) a major shift from the rational, objectivist, universalist pole to the emotive, subjectivist, particularist pole *within* what *remains* modernist culture. This shift reflects what many have in mind when they speak of postmodernity, but the latter is better viewed as a version of modernity than as a true alternative thereto. And when we look at Raschke's "next reformation" Christianity, it sits very much at the emotive, subjectivist, particularist end of the modernist spectrum.

It is true that many churches have changed since 1960. The experience of worship now tends to take precedence over the exposition of scripture, not that the two should be seen in opposition. We have moved from ministers to pastors, from preaching to counseling, from eldership to leadership, and from holiness to spirituality. I hesitate to add "from worship to entertainment," although I have heard a young minister (sorry, "servant-leader") use the word "audience" when referring to the congregation! And this is reflective of deeper shifts within our culture, *within* modernism, and points to the extent to which evangelicalism is molded by the dominant culture.

There are pointers within Raschke's text that call into question the coherence of his "modern/postmodern" distinction. He cites Kant as a harbinger of postmodern

thought (74-5, cf. 37-40), yet few would doubt his enlightenment credentials. Raschke notes that the church of modernity is a managed church, and contrasts this with charismatic Christianity as “thoroughly postmodern” (157). I know what he means when he talks about “managed” churches, yet charismatic congregations can be, in their own manner, as “managed” as any others. Again, Raschke may indeed warn evangelical churches committed to modernity that we marry the spirit of the times at the risk of widowhood (20), but where will his post “next reformation” churches be as postmodernity itself fades?

By privileging much under the rubric of “postmodernity,” Raschke exempts a great deal that should come under loving critique. The problem is not that Raschke is radical: it is that he is not radical enough. Certainly, theology itself can function as a graven image. After scholasticism we may well say with Raschke, “After theology we must all get on our faces” (215), although I am inclined to add, “After modernism (including postmodernism) we must all get on our faces.” But, of course, Jesus never leaves us in the dust, on our faces. He brings us to our feet and says, “Follow me.” Raschke does not say enough about all that this entails.

Colossians Remixed: Subverting the Empire, by Brian J. Walsh and Sylvia C. Keesmaat, Downers Grove, Illinois: InterVarsity Press, 2004, ISBN: 0-8308-2738-2, 256 pp. incl. bibliography. Reviewed by Dr. Keith C. Sewell, Chair of the History Department and Professor of History, Dordt College.

I recall sitting many years ago in Westminster Chapel, London, listening to Dr. Martyn Lloyd-Jones (1899-1981) preach repeatedly from the Pauline epistles: “Now is the righteousness of God revealed apart from the law.” “By grace you are saved ... it is the gift of God.” “There is therefore no condemnation” It was as if hundreds of years of a certain kind of Protestantism, (not least Reformed and Puritan Protestantism) were compressed and coiled up within a stupendous flow of impassioned advocacy. In its way it was impressive and yet also problematic. At that stage in my life, I was only beginning to think historically—and struggling to do so in a biblically directed way, as I still am. Yet even as “the Doctor’s” exposition unfolded with persuasive rhetoric and architectonic grandeur, I recall thinking, “Did Paul really think like this?” “Did Paul think in the way that evangelicals believe Luther thought?” “Did a latter day pietistic Puritanism really reflect the cast of Paul’s mind and the scope of his authorial intentions?”

Now we have before us a very different kind of Paul from that offered by the Welsh Calvinistic Methodism of Lloyd Jones and the Puritan commentaries that he studied so assiduously. In the publisher’s blurb, J. Richard Middleton alludes to Karl Adam’s famous description of Barth’s *Römerbrief* (1919) as falling “like a bomb on the playground of the theologians.” Certainly, *Colossians Remixed: Subverting the Empire* will come as a disconcerting challenge to those used to a Paul construed and appropriated for the purposes of rational theologizing and pious devotions.

Walsh and Keesmaat seek to speak to a generation who are frequently wary and often offended by the “absolute” tone of scriptural discourse and who, when confronted by its all-encompassing certitude, feel that they are in the presence of a kind of fascism (15 f., 152). They argue that the Bible has become, in a sense, misplaced in our contemporary church and culture (18-19), out of synch with postmodern syncretism (25). I think I prefer

hypermodernity to postmodernity, but we are certainly being confronted with a dissolving of boundaries on a global scale (31-3). Now it seems that all else must dissolve before the overarching hegemony of U.S.-led and U.S.-protected global corporate capitalism (35-7). This is the modern version of the “empire” that is now subject to the subversive solvent of the gospel. Of course, we have always known that at Colossians 2:15 Paul refers to a Roman triumph,¹ but Walsh and Keesmaat refuse to see this only as the drawing of an analogy for the depiction of what is only an inner spiritual reality. Rather, they rightly insist that the gospel—Paul’s “my gospel”—stands ultimately to bring to nothing every pagan and apostate tendency—“principalities and powers”—animating human life and culture.

In order to heighten this pivotal point, our authors boldly offer a *targum* of their own, which challenges the presumed hegemony of contemporary global corporate capitalism (39-48, cf. 137-9). In this, they re-apply (“remix”) the message of Colossians to our time in a manner reflective of the *targum* drawn of old in order to re-interpret the law for the benefit of Jews exiled in the alien circumstances of the Babylonian exile. By this means, they assert the compatibility of first-century pagan Rome and twenty-first-century, U.S.-led corporate capitalism (49 f.). Indeed, they draw some telling cross-comparisons (58 f.). The *Pax Americana* of today is as self-serving and no more truly peaceful than was the *Pax Romana* of old (61-3). Paul’s language is repeatedly subversive of the empire of Caesar. The empire in our age aspires to “the complete marketization of all of life and every corner of the globe.” (155). The authors are very explicit about this view because they “aren’t so sure the church would get it” (93). The stark truth is that the church has found ways of reading the Bible that leave the “principalities and powers” unchallenged (94-5). This is a reality that must be confronted, and this reality explains why we never heard anything like this *targum* in Westminster Chapel.

Walsh and Keesmaat are right in insisting that we read